

Reality At Last

‘Nobody goes out anymore,’ I said to my computer screen.

It was true. Not even me. Except to visit my mum once a week. And that was only because she didn’t have a computer. If she did, I’d probably Skype her and save myself the hour’s drive every Thursday to listen to her harp on about the neighbour’s horrible kids, or her latest conspiracy theory. Sitting in the conservatory my dad had built drinking weak tea and munching on stale biscuits while she talked about 9/11. Her latest theory being that the towers were alien homing beacons destroyed by the CIA in conjunction with NASA to prevent an attack on Earth.

‘I bet nobody’s thought of that,’ she said to me last week.

I reassured her that there were hundreds of sites dedicated to 9/11 conspiracy theories and that the alien angle had almost certainly been covered.

‘You spend too much time on that computer of yours,’ she said changing the subject. ‘You never visit me.’

‘It’s my job.’

‘Funny job,’ she snapped, as though nobody apart from her had ever done a day’s work in their lives. Despite the fact that her only job had been stacking shelves for six months in a supermarket when she was sixteen, a few months before she met my father.

I’d explained to her many times what I did. But she never got it. ‘So you’re a journalist, then?’ she would say looking baffled.

‘Yes. After a fashion.’

‘But I thought journalists roamed the streets looking for stories. You never leave the house.’

‘Yes, mum,’ I would stutter. ‘Times have changed.’

She would tut. ‘Who do you think you are, Bob Dylan?’ Always my cue to get up and make more tea. ‘And you used to be so active,’ she would yell after me as I dashed into the kitchen for cover.

She was right though. I used to walk in the Welsh hills with my father, or fell run in the Lake District with my school. At university I climbed in the Alps, hiked in the Cairngorms, and camped in the Picos of Northern Spain. Now I exercised on a treadmill. If I wanted to look at hills I looked at them online on National Geographic. If I wanted to see trees or birds, I went to the park.

I was a blogger. Mainly techie stuff on gadgets, computers, game consoles, phones, and hi-fis. Occasionally films and music. Sometimes travel. All written without ever

having to leave the house. I sometimes considered destroying my laptop. Covering it with lighter fluid and setting it ablaze. But I never did. I couldn't. My income was linked to my work. My work linked to my computer. My computer linked to my friends. My friends linked to friends I didn't know.

I was looking at a photo on my screen of a man I went to school with 25 years ago and who had asked me to be his friend on social media. I clicked YES, despite the fact that for two years he had made my life a living hell. I even sent him a message asking how he was.

I closed the lid of my laptop and decided it was time to go out. I walked to the shop and bought a packet of crisps, a sandwich, and a can of cola paying with my card that attracted a 50p fee because it was under a fiver. It made me wonder when I'd last used cash.

I ended up in the park and sat on a bench under a cherry tree fumbling in my pocket for my phone. It wasn't there. It was at home next to my laptop. What if I get a call? A message? What if the guy from school messages me back? I opened the can and took a long swig, feeling the sugar rush into my system, calming me down.

I ate my sandwich and crisps and looked up at the cherry tree. So real. So simple. I tried to hold that thought for as long as possible before it vanished. Alcoholics and drug addicts think they have scrambled minds, but I bet they can concentrate longer than the average computer junkie.

My blog posts often took an age to write because I was always flicking to social media, replying to comments or updating my status. Barely able to spend more than a few minutes writing before I was back LIKING someone for eating ham and eggs for lunch. LIKE!

I sometimes made a rule that I would write before I logged on. But that rarely lasted more than ten minutes, as I would invariably have to go online to check some information. And once online, that was it. Two hours later, I'd have a million windows open on my browser, having totally forgotten what I was looking for in the first place.

After my snack I went home and posted a statement on all my social media sites saying I was offline for the foreseeable future. I then emailed the blogs I wrote for and told them I was unavailable for work. I packed some things and walked to the train station with my old backpacking rucksack. I thought of taking a flight somewhere, but that meant logging on, and that was impossible. I was offline, as well as phoneless, having left both my phone and laptop in a box under my bed.

As I walked along the road from my house into the town, I felt twenty years old again. Remembering the glory days of travelling before the internet and mobile phones. When travelling meant being out of touch. Out of range. Off-grid. The occasional letter or postcard. A brief long distance call on my parents' birthdays to wish them well. That was what I was trying to get back. Not the excitement of my twenties. Just the freedom of being offline. Lost. Incommunicado.

I took a train to the coast and booked into a B&B along the seafront. £30 a night. No wifi, no TV. Bathroom along the corridor to be shared with the other guests, of which there were none. It was like walking back in time thirty years. To the summer holidays when we used to stay in guest houses as a family.

The room had a thick brown curtain pulled over a single window that looked over a yard full of bins and rotting cardboard boxes. The bed had a single mattress that smelt like it was made from seaweed. The tiny sink in the corner of the room was cracked and the water pressure almost non-existent, a dribble of brown water, barely enough to wet a toothbrush. The room was heated, but only just. Enough to prevent ice forming on the windows. It was perfect for what I was planning.

That night I headed down to the local pub a few doors up, got drunk on cider and ate pork pies and pickled eggs for dinner. The next day I walked up the coast as far as I could go and then came back again. Eating fish and chips on a park bench before going to the pub.

For the next four weeks this was my routine. Walking in the day, sitting in the pub talking to the locals in the evening. I didn't use a computer or speak on a phone. Except to call my mum once a week from a payphone to say I was alive.

I ate a lot and drank a lot. Walked along the coastline, breathed in the fresh air. I put on weight, I had colour, I felt healthy. By the time I returned to my house, I was a different person.

The next day I wandered down to the Job Centre. 'I'll do anything physical,' I told an advisor. 'Except clean toilets.' To which he told me that Jobseekers were required to follow up all job offers.

'I'm not a Jobseeker,' I said. 'I'm just looking for a job.'

The creased up frowns on his forehead disappeared giving him the complexion of a newborn. 'Oh, I'm sorry,' he apologised. 'I'm not used to dealing with people like you.'

Four days later I was mixing mortar on a building site. It was dirty, backbreaking and exhausting. But when I got home each evening, I felt incredible. Eating and then collapsing into bed for a full nine hours unbroken sleep, before getting up at 6.30 the next morning to do it all again. Six days a week.

On Sundays I went round to my mother's for lunch. Friday and Saturday nights I went out on the town with my friends. Not my old friends still staring into their screens. My new friends from work. My real friends who I could touch and wrestle with. Talk and joke. Flesh and blood. Clichés the whole night long. Reality at last.